

‘Therein Lies a Tale’: Musical and Literary Structure in Ravel’s *Ma mère l’Oye**

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In the early autumn of 1908, Maurice Ravel spent several days in Valvins babysitting two young children, Mimie and Jean Godebski. By letter, he reported to their mother, Ida, on his principal duties:

Family life now resumes: laborious conversations with Miss [Hatchell, the children’s English governess], aided by gestures and dictionaries; stories to tell the kids, not too gloomy in the evening to avoid nightmares, but lugubrious in the morning to stimulate their appetite.¹

The stories Ravel shared with Mimie and Jean Godebski inspired a short and simple piano duet, which he dedicated to the children. He called it a ‘Pavane’—not, this time, a lament for a defunct princess, but a lullaby for a sleeping one: ‘Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant [Sleeping Beauty’s Pavane].’

Just over a year later, in early 1910, the Godebski children’s ‘Pavane’ was supplemented, at the urging of Ravel’s publisher, by another four musical fairytales for piano duet. ‘Petit Poucet [Tom Thumb]’ took its inspiration from the tale of the same name in Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l’Oye* [*Histories or Stories from Times Past, with Morals: Tales of Mother Goose*] of 1697 (‘La belle au bois dormant’ is the first story in Perrault’s collection). ‘Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodas [Laideronnette, Empress of the

* Research for this article was carried out during doctoral studies at the University of Adelaide.

¹ *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*, comp., trans. & ed. Arbie Orenstein (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 100.

Pagodas]’ was based on the tale ‘Le serpent vert [The Green Serpent]’ from the *Contes nouvelles, ou Les fées à la Mode* [New stories, or Fairies in Fashion] of Comtesse Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, published a year later in 1698. ‘Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête [The Conversations of the Beauty and the Beast]’ was drawn from Mme Leprince de Beaumont’s ‘La Belle et la Bête’ of 1756 (published in her *Magasin des enfants*). The final piece, ‘Le jardin féerique [The Enchanted Garden],’ represents no particular tale, but serves as a kind of general apotheosis.²

The five pieces were published in the spring of 1910 as the suite *Ma mère l’Oye: cinq pièces enfantines*.³ The première took place at the début concert of the newly formed Société Musicale Indépendante on 20 April 1910. Ravel had hoped that Mimie and Jean Godebski would give the first performance of ‘their’ suite, but ten-year-old Mimie was too nervous to perform in public. The première was given instead by two other children, Jeanne Leleu (who went on to win the Prix de Rome and teach at the Paris Conservatoire) and Geneviève Durony.⁴

On the surface, these ‘five pieces for children’ (literally ‘five childlike pieces’) are the simplest of Ravel’s piano works. Written for and dedicated to Mimie and Jean, *Ma mère l’Oye* is a touching tribute to both a friendship and an artistic tradition: with Fauré’s *Dolly* (1894–1896) and Bizet’s *Jeux d’enfants* (1872) it completes a triptych of outstanding French piano duet suites linked with children and childhood.⁵ Like these other musical *enfantines*, *Ma mère l’Oye* is notable for its straightforward and concentrated expression and its charmingly accessible musical material. Beneath this most limpid of surfaces, however, lies a tauter narrative core than can be found in Fauré’s and Bizet’s essentially pictorial suites. This is perhaps to be expected from a work based on some of the most famous stories in the European folk and literary tradition—the Beauty and the Beast, the Sleeping Beauty, and Tom Thumb and his brothers lost in the woods. Yet the directness with which these fairytales are realised in *Ma mère l’Oye* and the cohesion of the music’s internal structures and large-scale gestures suggest that Ravel’s inspiration was guided by more than the picturesque scenes conjured up by his chosen tales.

Beyond the titles and allusive epigraphs that Ravel quotes above each piece, to what extent was his work shaped by the idioms and narrative patterns of the literary genre that inspired it? Music and literature are, after all, in constant dialogue throughout Ravel’s *œuvre*: in his relatively small but finely honed and innovative output of *mélodies* (the genre with which his published output began and ended), in his two works for the lyric stage (*L’Heure espagnole* and *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*) and in the literary echoes of instrumental works such as *Jeux d’eau* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (both headed with poetic epigraphs by Ravel’s friend Henri de Régnier).

Direct patterns of literary influence may also be found in two major instrumental works composed within a few years of *Ma mère l’Oye*. As Ravel himself acknowledged, and Brian Newbould demonstrated, the ‘Pantoum’ of Ravel’s Piano Trio (1914) shows the composer consciously exploiting the complex structure of Indonesian *pantun* poetry (interweaving two

² The historical and cultural background of the fairytales Ravel chose is explored in greater detail in Emily Kilpatrick, *The Language of Enchantment: Childhood and Fairytale in the Music of Maurice Ravel* (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2008) 72–76.

³ Maurice Ravel, *Ma mère l’Oye: cinq pièces enfantines* (Paris: Durand et Fils, 1910) D&F 7746.

⁴ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover, 1991) 62; Roger Nichols, *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber, 1987) 21.

⁵ André Caplet and Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht also composed piano duet suites on similar themes (*Un tas de petites choses* and *La Nursery* respectively).

contrasting strands of material in ways that repeatedly juggle and invert antecedent-consequent relationships).⁶ Ravel's piano triptych *Gaspard de la nuit*, completed just before he composed the 'Pavane de la belle au bois dormant,' also juxtaposes literary and musical narratives: as Olivier Messiaen, Roy Howat and others have shown, the narrative and dramatic impact of Aloysius Bertrand's prose-poems is focussed through meticulously constructed sonata forms.⁷ Extra-musical narrative and musical architecture are inextricably intertwined in *Gaspard*: 'If the analytical language [in this study] ... keeps veering towards the picturesque,' Howat writes, 'it is because of how strongly the piece's form acts out its story.'⁸

Always fascinated by the intricate manipulations and complex interactions of form and expression, Ravel would not have failed to recognise that the fairytale is a genre shaped more than almost any other by clear and consistent narrative archetypes. Indeed, many of the conventions of the fairytale have natural correspondences with musical idioms: determinable patterns of action and reaction, clearly defined structures and a characteristic directness and simplicity of expression. It would seem logical, then, to find traces of the narratives and structures of fairytales in *Ma mère l'Oye*—like *Gaspard de la nuit* an instrumental work defined by words and stories. Just as the three movements of *Gaspard* are preceded, in the published score, by the poems that inspired them, so Ravel placed epigraphs from his chosen tales at the head of the three central movements of *Ma mère l'Oye*. The close relationship between words and music is clear on the page from the outset.

The Fairytale Narrative and 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête'

In his 1928 treatise *The Morphology of the Folktale*, the Russian folklorist and structuralist Vladimir Propp deduced that all European fairytales are constructed according to similar narrative conventions. He identified thirty-one possible stages or 'events' in the fairytale narrative, contending that while no individual tale passes through all thirty-one stages, they each use certain ordered combinations. Propp's postulated narrative typically progresses according to the following basic structure: the scene is set in a distant land, 'once upon a time'; the hero is compelled to leave home and undertake a journey (to reverse a curse or enchantment perhaps, or simply to seek his or her fortune); there is a magical encounter of some kind, which frequently involves the bestowing of a gift or the promise of aid in return for certain favours; the hero continues to the point of climax (where the villain or curse is directly confronted and broken with the aid of the magical helper or agent) and receives some glorious reward (a perfect spouse, a kingdom, riches beyond compare).⁹

⁶ Arbie Orenstein, ed., 'Le Trio de Maurice Ravel: Analyse par l'auteur', *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* 9 (2005–2006): 64–65; Brian Newbould, 'Ravel's *Pantoum*,' *Musical Times* 116:1585 (Mar. 1975): 228–31.

⁷ Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, *Analyses des œuvres pour piano de Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Durand, 2003) 25–38 (concerning 'Ondine' only); Roy Howat, 'Ravel and the Piano,' *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) 81–7; Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2009) 29–31, 35–7.

⁸ Howat, 'Ravel and the Piano' 85.

⁹ Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: Texas UP, 1968) *passim*. Many of Propp's conclusions have subsequently been challenged, since they contain numerous generalisations and assumptions that spring from his desire to identify and construct a sort of Ur-fairytale. See Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 14–15. Propp's work nevertheless remains a standard point of reference, and his central contention, that all fairytales are constructed after similar narrative conventions, is generally accepted.

The balance and progression of the fairytale narrative is clearly defined: we are always aware of where we are in the story and can guess what sort of event will happen next, even if we do not know precisely what form it will take. This narrative consistency is determined equally by clear and decisive patterns of action and reaction: we know that any interdiction will be violated ('*don't* open the silver trunk!' or '*you must* return before nightfall') just as we know that an animal helped by the hero will turn out to have magical powers or the capacity somehow to smooth their path later in the story.

Within these coherent over-arching narratives, fairytales are generally formed of series of episodes that can be treated quite independently: Cinderella at the ball is a very different character from the household drudge sifting lentils from ashes, and the Fairy Godmother's transformation of pumpkins into coaches and rats into horses occupies a separate sphere from the royal herald's painstaking and decidedly unmagical search for the owner of the glass slipper. Fairytale scholar Max Lüthi wrote that 'the fairytale frees things and people from their natural context and places them in new relationships, which can also be easily dissolved.'¹⁰ Therefore, just as a king can live in a castle, so may an ogre, while a friendless young woman can come to a happy domestic arrangement with seven bachelor dwarves. Rootless or isolated events, places and characters can be blended in innumerable ways, but the tale itself always maintains its integrity and its structure.

These key structural elements of the fairytale—clear and balanced forms, in which varied images are juxtaposed and combined—underpin Ravel's '*Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête*' to particularly telling effect. Here, within a consistent, lilting 3/4 metre, the Beauty's sweetly modal melody is juxtaposed with the darkly chromatic grumblings of the Beast. Heard first in isolation (the Beauty's theme in bb. 1–48, the Beast's across bb. 49–105), the two themes sound simultaneously from bar 106, as the movement hastens to its climax. Here too, we find a tale and a movement defined by clear patterns of action and reaction. In Mme Leprince de Beaumont's story, before they retire to bed each evening the Beast asks the Beauty to marry him. Her continued refusals set up the expectation that is eventually fulfilled when, seeing the Beast apparently dead, she acknowledges and declares her love for him. F. André Favat, in his 1977 study of the fairytale, described the importance of such patterns of repetition and contrast in terms that have a natural correspondence with musical structure: important for their role in filling out the narrative, repetitive gestures also heighten tension and postpone its release, 'which upon final resolution makes for enhanced pleasure.'¹¹

Ravel's representation of the fairytale highlights these narrative devices: his '*conversations*' are almost entirely comprised of supplicating phrases that are repeated and then transformed. That this pattern characterises the music of the Beauty as well as the supplicant Beast suggests, perhaps, that in Ravel's realisation of the tale pictorialism defers to narrative impetus (the fairytale narrative style is typically active rather than descriptive). The composer makes extensive use of the archetypal construction of paired short antecedent phrases, identical or sequential, followed by a longer, consolatory consequent phrase, as Example 1 demonstrates (from b. 9). The local phrase sequences then form a broader tripartite pattern across systems

¹⁰ Max Lüthi, *Once upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York: Ungar, 1970) 77.

¹¹ F. André Favat, *Child and Tale: The Origins of Interest* (Urbana, IL.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977) 52.

2, 3 and 5 in Example 1 (the movement's opening section concludes just a few bars later), reinforcing the gestural strength of the supplicating sequences.

Example 1. 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête,' bb. 2–39, *prima*; supplicative antecedent-consequent sequences. Unless otherwise acknowledged, all music examples are taken from Maurice Ravel, *Ma mère l'Oye* [piano duet], ed. Roger Nichols (London: Edition Peters, 2008), EP 71002; reduced as necessary by the author.

Ravel inverts this technique of phrase expansion to build to his two climaxes, first across bars 85–105 and then more dramatically in bars 128–44 (as shown in Ex. 2). Here, the four-bar phrases that commence the build-up and *accelerando* (bb. 128–35) are reduced in bars 136–39 to pairs of two bars, then to a single bar (b. 140). This threefold fragmentation and diminution of the melodies (a direct inversion of their expansion, as seen in Ex. 1) compellingly directs tension towards the crux of the movement—just as a skilful storyteller would do.

Example 2. 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête,' bb. 128–44, melody only

The local threefold patterns of action and reaction may thus be seen interlocking with broader antecedent-consequent structures. Ravel's tripartite sequences also draw attention to an archetypal literary parallel, the threefold repetitions and gestures that form a key part of the fairytale narrative (a genie will give three wishes, the third sister is the most beautiful, and although the woodcutter and his wife twice fail to lose Petit Poucet and his brothers in the woods, we know very well that their third attempt will be successful). By including in his epigraph one of the Beast's unsuccessful proposals ('Beauty, will you be my wife?' 'No,

Beast!') as well as his transformation into a prince 'more beautiful than Cupid himself,'¹² Ravel reinforces the intuitive link between these literary and musical patterns of repetition and contrast, focussing his narrative through the sequence of repeated denials and final revelation. Ravel's genius, in 'Les entretiens,' is to inflect one of the most archetypal of musical gestures (antecedent-consequent phrase structure) so that it underlines both a generic literary idiom (the fairytale's transfiguring 'third wish') and a specific motif (the Beast's repeated proposals).

'To simplify my style and pare down my writing': Expression and Motivic Design

A further defining characteristic of fairytales (of all languages and cultures) is their clarity of form, character and expression. Notwithstanding the ritual elegance of the idiom, the language of fairytales is generally simple and straightforward. Sentences are usually brief and direct; there are no circumlocutory phrases and few long words. Characters are rapidly sketched but instantly identifiable and their predilection to good or evil is never in doubt.

In his own summation of *Ma mère l'Oye*, Ravel acknowledged the importance, in this work in particular, of clarity, simplicity and restraint: 'The desire to evoke the poetry of childhood,' he wrote, 'naturally led me to simplify my style and pare down [*dépouiller*] my writing.'¹³ Ravel's justification for this manner of writing was a broad, extra-musical one (the wish to 'evoke the poetry of childhood'). He would not, however, have been unaware of the structural and literary resonances implicit in this musical aesthetic.¹⁴

In *Ma mère l'Oye* Ravel achieves his *dépouillé* (pared-down, or unornamented) effect not merely by the suite's unusually sparse, clear textures, but more profoundly through the reduction of melodic material to the barest minimum. In each of the five movements a small motivic cell is subjected to a continuous process of development and expansion. The 'Pavane' is based entirely on the simple modal motif of the first bar, which is repeated, loosely inverted and effectively augmented across the entire movement, the recurring tie across the half-bar acting as a referential anchor.

By contrast, the melody of 'Petit Poucet' wanders unchecked by the irregular bar lines, accompanied by restless quavers that refuse to settle firmly in any key. Despite this seemingly flexible construction, the movement's melodic material is as tightly focused as that of the 'Pavane.' Both of the principal motives (labelled in Ex. 3a as A, bb. 4–8, and B, bb. 12–15) present a fragment of melody that is immediately reprised in altered form (A/, bb. 9–11, and B/, bb. 15–19); both are characterised by melodic descents across the interval of a fifth (principally dominant-tonic; the descents from *f*" to *bb*" across bars 6–7 and 10–11 prepare the modulation in bar 12, becoming an effective supertonic-dominant gesture); and both offset

¹² "'La Belle, voulez-vous être ma femme?'—'Non, la Bête!' ... un prince plus beau que l'Amour,' from Mme Leprince de Beaumont's 'La Belle et la Bête'; ; epigraph to '????' in Ravel, *Ma mère l'Oye*.

¹³ 'Le dessein d'évoquer la poésie de l'enfance m'a naturellement conduit à simplifier ma manière et à dépouiller mon écriture.' Roland-Manuel, 'Une esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel,' *La revue musicale* numéro spéciale (Dec. 1938): 21.

¹⁴ Deborah Mawer briefly discusses the concept of *dépouillement* with regard to *Ma mère l'Oye*. See Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 39, 41. The term and its aesthetic and technical implications have also been explored *inter alia* by Barbara Kelly. See Barbara Kelly, 'Ravel After Debussy: Inheritance, Influence and Style,' *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, Contexts and Legacies: Essays in Honour of François Lesure*, ed. Barbara Kelly and Kerry Murphy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 174, 180. For an exploration of Ravel's phrase 'the poetry of childhood,' see Kilpatrick, *Language of Enchantment* 143–63, *passim*.

this general downward movement with upward steps. Bars 19–22, labelled in Example 3a as A/B, complete the B motif by recalling A/ with their higher pitch, alternating 3/4 and 2/4 metres and downward melodic slopes.

Example 3a. 'Petit Poucet,' bb. 4–21 (B), *prima*; outlined descending fifths shown in brackets

This congruity of melodic material is typified in the climactic central passage (Ex. 3b), which uses elements of both motives and is approached through a sequential treatment (from bar 27) of the three-note rising figure that launched motif A. The rising sequence continues into the climax, followed immediately by a single triplet group whose rhythm echoes bar 17 (motif B). The phrases enclose a series of descending gestures emphasising the perfect fifth (notably $d'''-g''$ and $g''-c''$). The metric shifts and descending melodic figurations of bars 9–11 and 19–21 are recalled across bars 35–38, whilst the toggling thirds recall bars 12–13.

Example 3b. 'Petit Poucet,' bb. 33–8, *prima*

While in the 'Pavane' Ravel progressively elaborates his opening motif, at the end of 'Petit Poucet' he does the reverse. His initial melody is pared back to its barest outline—interlocking falling fifths (again emphasising dominant-tonic and supertonic-dominant movement), which then compress into a single fifth with an intermediate step (Ex. 3c).¹⁵

Example 3c. 'Petit Poucet,' bb. 60–74, *prima*

¹⁵ The compression of melodic material here is not unlike the climatic progression of 'Les entretiens,' as shown in Example 2 above. Here, though, it brings a gradual release of tension (conveyed particularly through the final drawn-out phrase), an interesting example of Ravel's ability to inflect the same musical technique to entirely different dramatic effects.

Ravel employs the same technique of skeletal *dépouillement* to even greater effect in 'Laideronnette.' While the black-key pentatonicism gives the movement a natural harmonic unity, a more compelling basis for its melodic organisation can be found in the three-note motif F#-C#-D#. This motif, outlined repeatedly across the opening melodic statement (as bracketed in Ex. 4a), is highlighted more explicitly in the opening three phrases of the central gong-like passage (as shown in Ex. 4b).

Example 4a. 'Laideronnette,' bb. 9–13, *prima*

Example 4b. 'Laideronnette,' bb. 65–76, *seconda*

This whole central (B) section in fact traces with surprising exactitude the contours of the opening (A) section's arabesques, a direct example of Ravel's 'pared-down' technique in action. Example 5 demonstrates the *gestalt*-like relationship between the two passages.

Example 5. 'Laideronnette,' *dépouillement* of A section (bb. 9–64) in B section (bb. 65–130)

A, bars 9–16: Three phrases based around F#-C#-D# motif, progressively more ornamented

B, bars 65–77: Three phrases based around F#-C#-D# motif, progressively more ornamented

A, bars 13–31: Sense of inversion of preceding phrases; downward movement across an octave ($d^{\#}-d^{\#}$)

B, bars 79–104: Sense of inversion of preceding phrases (cf bars 74-77 and 82-85); downward movement across an octave ($d^{\#}-d^{\#}$)

A, bars 16–23: Repetition and extension of bars 9-16

B, bars 91-104: Repetition and extension of bars 65-77

A, bars 24-31: Transition

B, no direct equivalent

A, bars 32–37: Repeated $c^{\#}$ (ornamented with $d^{\#}$), followed by a melodic gesture (bars 33, 36) reprised immediately in approximate inversion (bars 34, 37)

B, bars 105–117: Repeated $d^{\#}$, followed by a melodic gesture (bars 107-110) reprised immediately in approximate inversion (bars 113-117)

Example 5 (cont.). 'Laideronnette'

38

A
Loose retrogradation of opening fourth + second motif (bars 38-39); movement around a pivot note (bars 40-41); repetition of bars 38-41 (bars 42-45); bars 40-41 and 44-45 repeated across bars 46-54

B
Bars 121-123 present bar 38 in loose retrograde inversion; movement around a pivot note (bars 119-122, 123-124); modified repetition of bars 119-123 across bars 125-130

56
A
Concluding figurations suggest further elaboration of opening motif

131
B
Section concludes by returning to opening three-note motif

That same pervading three-note motif (F#–C#–D#), shorn of its sharps and set in retrograde, then becomes the main motivic gesture of 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête,' where it occurs twice within the first nine-note phrase (with an octave variant, as bracketed in Ex. 6).¹⁶

Example 6. 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête,' prima, bb. 5–8

2


The defining motivic combination of a second and a fourth recurs constantly throughout the Beauty's music. It also has a hidden correspondence in the Beast's subject: although his theme appears on a first glance unrelated to that of the Beauty, it employs the diminished forms of the same two intervals, minor seconds (one transformed into a diminished octave) and a diminished fourth (Ex. 7). The broader structure of 'La Belle et la Bête,' with its threefold phrase augmentations and diminutions discussed above, also encapsulates the juxtaposed development and *dépouillement* of melodic material already encountered in the earlier movements.

Example 7. 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête,' seconda, bb. 49–53

49

The expansiveness and long unfolding melody of 'Le jardin féérique' recalls 'Petit Poucet.' However, in its constant repetition of a single important rhythmic figure—a sarabande-

¹⁶ Ravel used a similar retrograde mirroring of melodic material across the third and fourth movements of his Piano Trio. See Roy Howat, 'Thinking Music: An Analytical Study of Ravel's Piano Trio,' *Piano* 15.1 (Jan.–Feb. 2007): 36–39.

like  in which the stress falls on the second beat—the movement harks back to the haunting suspensions of the ‘Pavane,’ a gesture that serves to bridge the two outer movements. Again, the melodic material is quietly focussed, with the recurring scalic figures throughout, and the gestural inversions and reprise across bars 40–50, combined in bars 40–43 of the *seconda* with the rising tenths of the opening (see Ex. 10b below).

Five Journeys, One Tale: Large-scale Musical Architecture

In Ravel’s exploration and gradual unfolding of small, characteristic motives across each movement, we may particularly sense echoes of the traditional journeying of the fairytale hero. This is perhaps to be expected, since the tales that underlie the suite’s first four movements all follow that archetype: the Prince will traverse the woods to wake the Sleeping Beauty; Petit Poucet and his brothers embark on an expedition (that eventually results in the rewards of seven-league boots and wealth beyond compare); Laideronnette [Little Ugly], cursed by a malicious fairy with ugliness, finds an abandoned boat that carries her across the sea to the fantastic land of the Pagodes and Pagodines. Mme Leprince de Beaumont’s ‘Beauty’ also travels through the woods (to the abode of the Beast/Prince), but here Ravel’s setting evokes a journey, implicit in the fairytale, of the spirit as well as the flesh. The piece’s eventual superimposition of the Beauty’s lydian-mode theme (with its ‘uplifted’ fourth) upon the chromatic grumblings of the Beast is equally expressive of her desperate quest to find and rescue the Beast, as well as her internal struggles (over his fervent proposals). The quietly magical glissando that surmounts the crisis thus evokes a moment of self-revelation (she loves him) as well as the Beast’s transformation into handsome prince.

The separate quests of these four movements are realised musically with the characteristic integrity and variety of fairytale episodes. Yet in Ravel’s combination of incomplete and seemingly disparate images—the sleep of a Princess, little boys lost in a wood, a magical orchestra of tiny jewelled figures, the conversations of the Beauty and the Beast, and finally an enchanted garden—we may trace the outlines of a broader narrative. The ordering and nature of the five movements, in fact, follows the basic fairytale narrative that Vladimir Propp outlined in 1928. The scene is set in the ‘Pavane,’ whose air of mystery and distance conveys the essence of ‘once upon a time’ and suggests the laying of an enchantment. ‘Petit Poucet’ depicts the protagonist setting out on a journey or quest, wandering through the woods—the quintessential fairytale location—in need of guidance (which the deceptive birds cannot provide: the movement leads us through an arch form and ends precisely where it began, the little boys having wandered in a great circle). The little *pagodes* and *pagodines* of ‘Laideronnette’ offer an entirely magical encounter, the six-sharp key signature and predominant use of the black keys as far removed as possible, in both tonal and tactile terms, from the C minor of ‘Petit Poucet’ and the empty key signatures of the suite’s outer movements. ‘Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête’ takes us to the darkest and most dangerous part of the quest, where an enchantment is finally broken, so that ‘they all lived happily ever after’ in ‘Le jardin féérique.’

The strength of this narrative archetype is reinforced by Ravel’s choice of epigraphs for the three central movements. For ‘Petit Poucet’ he chose a passage from near the beginning of the tale, as the hero and his brothers begin their wanderings. The passage quoted for ‘Laideronnette’ is taken from near the midpoint of her story, when, having crossed the sea, she takes a bath

accompanied by an orchestra of *pagodes* and *pagodines* ('some had theorbos made of walnut shells, others had viols made of almond shells, for it was necessary to proportion the instruments to their sizes'¹⁷). The epigraph to 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête' leads us towards the crux of our tale and theirs—the Beast's seeming death and his magical transformation into a handsome prince. Propp's 'Ur-tale' sequence may thus be seen arching across the movements of *Ma mère l'Oye*, locking together the five disparate episodes like the pieces of a jigsaw. In that sense, *Ma mère l'Oye* shows Ravel intuiting a structural and narrative logic that scholars of the folk-tale genre would reason out a generation later.

Just as a unified narrative spans the suite, a coherent musical discourse runs beneath its surface. An initial connection may be drawn through the modal colours of Ravel's melodies. The 'Pavane' uses the Æolian mode, and the opening melody of 'Petit Poucet' is Dorian. 'Laideronnette' avoids the Byzantine modes in favour of the gapped pentatonic, while the opening melody of 'La Belle et la Bête' subtly stretches a Lydian mode over a mostly pentatonic frame. 'Le jardin féérique,' the one movement anchored in Ionian major, takes on Phrygian tints at the start of its central passage (bb. 23–26, ambiguously mixing F♯ and F♮ across voices). Its C-major tonality also resolves the A (relative minor) Æolian poignancy of the 'Pavane,' a large-scale pattern of action and reaction that endorses the sense of the fairytale wanderer's journey and safe return.

If this strong sense of modal variety serves to impart an 'antique' character across the suite, it is otherwise unremarkable in the output of a composer consistently drawn to modal colourings: as Roland-Manuel put it, 'Ravel's melodies ... fall as naturally into the ancient modes as the old folk-songs of the French provinces.'¹⁸ Ravel himself remarked that his enjoyment of modal flavours developed primarily from the music of his hero Emmanuel Chabrier.¹⁹ Chabrier's influence may equally be traced in a telling gesture that links the first three movements of *Ma mère l'Oye*, characterised by an irresistibly obsessive combination of pedal notes and chromatic 'pendula' underlying melodic repetitions or alternations of fourths or fifths, as in the 'Idylle' from Chabrier's *Pièces pittoresques* of 1880 (Ex. 8). The Beast's theme in 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête' (Ex. 7, above) exploits a related type of rocking chromaticism. The resulting sense of quiet chromatic instability infusing the first four movements is finally dispelled by the sweeping diatonic glissandi that end 'Le jardin féérique.'

Example 8. Chromatic pendula in tenor voice

a) 'Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant,' bb. 5–8

¹⁷ 'tels avaient des théorbes faits d'une coquille de noix; tels avaient des violes faites d'une coquille d'amande; car il fallait bien proportionner les instruments à leur taille.' Mme d'Aulnoy, *Le serpent vert*; epigraph to 'Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes,' in Ravel, *Ma mère l'Oye*.

¹⁸ Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947) 112.

¹⁹ Marcel Marnat, *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal* (Paris: Hazan, 1995) 10–11.

b) 'Petit Poucet,' bb. 69–72

c) 'Laideronnette,' bb. 46–49 (also 175–78)

d) Emmanuel Chabrier, 'Idylle,' *Pièces pittoresques* (1880), bb. 18–23 (also 26–31) [Chabrier, *Works for Solo Piano*, ed. Roy Howat (New York: Dover, 1995)]

A more subtle linking gesture emerges from the modal motivic fragment G–A that ends the 'Pavane' and then immediately begins 'Petit Poucet' (bracketed in Exx. 9a and 9b), a repetition offset by the contrasted accompaniments. The same fragment may be heard making a triumphal final return in the chimes that complete 'Le jardin féerique' (bracketed in Ex. 9c).

Example 9a. 'Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant,' b. 20

Example 9b. 'Petit Poucet,' bb. 1–2, *seconda*

Example 9c. 'Le jardin féérique,' b. 50–52, *seconda*

All five movements of *Ma mère l'Oye* also share Ravel's characteristic melodic combination of diatonic seconds and fourths, already discussed in relation to 'Laideronette' and 'La Belle et la Bête.' The two intervals sometimes present in contrary motion (the opening bars of 'La Belle et la Bête'), and sometimes conjunctly (bb. 5–8 of the 'Pavane,' and the final melodic gesture of 'Petit Poucet,' bb. 72–75 in Ex. 3c). The opening six bars of 'Le jardin féérique' juxtapose the two versions (as bracketed in Ex. 10a, bb. 1–4 as against bb. 5–6). Example 10b shows how rising and falling fourths also dominate the end of the suite. Given the pervasiveness of these paired intervals (diatonic second and fourth) throughout *Ma mère l'Oye*, their concentration in 'Le jardin féérique' serves as a gentle summation and resolution of all that has passed, a musical as well as dramatic apotheosis.

Example 10a. 'Le jardin féérique,' bars 1–6 (melody only)

Example 10b. 'Le jardin féérique,' bb. 40–50; outlined descending and ascending fourths in *prima* melody (bracketed) combined with chiming fourths in *seconda* from b. 44 (accented)

Less than two years after the première of *Ma mère l'Oye*, Ravel was commissioned by Jacques Rouché (then director of the Théâtre des Arts) to transform his piano duets into a ballet score.²⁰

²⁰ The ballet première was given at the Théâtre des Arts on 29 January 1912. For correspondence between Ravel and Rouché on the ballet, see '12 lettres de Maurice Ravel à Jacques Rouché,' LAS Ravel (Maurice) 1–13, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra), Paris. Deborah Mawer also discusses the transition from piano suite into ballet in *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, 44–8. The orchestral ballet score (also titled *Ma mère l'Oye*) was published by Durand et Fils (Paris) in 1912 (D&F 8397), together with Jacques Charlot's reduction for solo piano (D&F 8395).

Nowhere is the coherence of the suite's melodic material more apparent than in the Prélude that Ravel added (together with a 'Danse du rouet' and some linking interludes) for the ballet (Ex. 11). Bars 16–20 of the Prélude directly combine the two key motifs from the outer movements of *Ma mère l'Oye*, their quiet but solid 'bookend' links thus made explicit. In the succeeding bars, the fragments of the 'Pavane' and 'Le jardin féérique' merge into a snatch of 'Petit Poucet' (bb. 20–24), which is surmounted by the *très expressif* motif from the central section of 'Laideronnette' (bb. 105–18) in bars 25–31; bars 32–34 hint at both 'Laideronnette' (bb. 119–24, continuing the *expressif* theme) and the 'Pavane' (bb. 5–8, which share almost the same notes—in different order—and the tie across the middle of the bar), before the bell-like chords of 'Le jardin féérique' return in bar 35, this time underlain by the Beast's motif. The gentle ease of these combinations suggests that Ravel was aware from the outset of the underlying structural cohesion of his melodic material.

Ravel as Storyteller: Perspective and Expression

While the formal design of *Ma mère l'Oye* (in its original suite format) is underpinned by the structures, the gestures and the narrative coherence of the literary fairytale, its expressive content often evokes the act and art of storytelling itself. This quality was implicit in the suite from its creation: as the letter quoted at the beginning of this essay demonstrates, Ravel was not just a favourite babysitter for Mimie and Jean Godebski, but also a hard-working teller of stories. As Mimie recalled in later life:

There are few of my childhood memories in which Ravel does not find a place. Of all my parents' friends I had a predilection for Ravel because he used to tell me stories that I loved. I used to climb on his knee and indefatigably he would begin, 'Once upon a time...' And it would be *Laideronnette* or *La Belle et la Bête* or, especially, the adventures of a poor mouse that he made up for me. I used to laugh uproariously at these and then feel guilty because they were really very sad.²¹

Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, one of Ravel's closest friends from the 1920s until his death, wrote vividly of his ability not only to tell stories, but to act them out as well:

One had to see him then, arching his back, his index finger raised mysteriously beside his nose, changing his looks and, like a child, believing in his metamorphosis, amusing himself by adopting a deep, cavernous voice ...²²

Perhaps Ravel had inherited his storytelling talent from his Basque mother Marie Delouart: Jean Françaix recalled that Ravel once told his father (the composer-pianist Alfred Françaix), 'When I was a child, my mother told me fairytales like nobody else could. Without her, I would never have written *Ma mère l'Oye*.'²³

We can almost hear Ravel acting out his tales in 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête.' Although the Beast growls and stamps, there is no terror in him; he never breaks out of the

²¹ Nichols, *Ravel Remembered* 19.

²² 'Il fallait le voir alors, courbant le dos, l'index mystérieusement levé contre son nez, changer son regard, et, comme un enfant, croire à sa métamorphose.' Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous* (Geneva: Milieu du monde, 1945) 189.

²³ 'Ma mère, lorsque j'étais enfant, me racontait comme personne des contes de fées; sans elle, je n'aurais jamais écrit *Ma mère l'Oye*.' Jean Françaix, *De la musique et des musiciens* (Paris: Fondation Polignac, 1999) 164.

Example 11. 'Prélude,' *Ma mère l'Oye* (ballet), bars 14–37 [Maurice Ravel, *Ma mère l'Oye* (Ballet score, piano reduction), trans. Jacques Charlot (Paris: Durand, 1912) D&F 8395]

The musical score consists of five systems of piano reduction for the 'Prélude' from *Ma mère l'Oye*.
 System 1 (bars 14-17): Marked *p* and *pp*. Features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. The left hand has a simple accompaniment.
 System 2 (bars 18-22): Marked *p* and *pp*. Includes the marking *expressif* and *pp expr.*. The right hand has a more active melodic line.
 System 3 (bars 23-27): Marked *p* and *p expr.*. Features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand.
 System 4 (bars 28-32): Marked *p* and *pp*. Includes a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand.
 System 5 (bars 33-37): Marked *pp* and *p un peu traîné*. Features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. The piece concludes with a fermata over a final chord.

gentle, rocking waltz-rhythm of the opening passage. It becomes easy to imagine Ravel going into falsetto to play the Beauty's response to the Beast's grumbles, or—as in Jourdan-Morhange's recollection above—down on all fours and snapping playfully at the legs and hands of his listeners. The birdcalls of 'Petit Poucet' are cast in a similar form, their cool mechanical precision far from the expressive song of 'Oiseaux tristes' (*Miroirs*) or the joyous

cacophony of the dawn chorus in *Daphnis et Chloé*. More immediately, the birdcalls suggest a wind-up toy, such as the mechanical chaffinch Ravel treasured—still on view and singing in his house in Montfort l’Amaury.

When telling stories to children we naturally adopt our most expressive voices, utilising a much broader range of pitches and inflections than normal and emphasising the musicality often inherent in the text. With its flexible, prosodic nature, the wandering melody of ‘Petit Poucet’ seems, therefore, to evoke not just the lost little boys but also the storyteller’s own murmuring voice. Indeed, certain phrases hint at the vocal cadences and melodic patterns of the accompanying epigraph. The opening melodic phrase can easily be equated with the natural inflections of the epigraph’s first line (‘Il croyait aisement trouvé son chemin’²⁴): an initial rising inflection is followed by a gradual descent across the course of the phrase (offset by the constantly rising steps of the accompaniment). Similarly, the climactic melody at bars 33–38 echoes the inflections of the final phrase of the epigraph text (‘les oiseaux étaient venus qui avaient tout mangé’²⁵). Here, another rising inflection and gradual descent is completed by two crotchets, whose emphatic rhythm and descending minor third match the inflection that a speaking voice would naturally impart to ‘tout mangé,’ as the conclusion of both sentence and paragraph (see Ex. 3b, above).

Ravel was clearly an expressive storyteller with an acute ear for the natural inflections and cadences of the spoken voice. *Ma mère l’Oye* was composed shortly after the song cycle *Histoires naturelles* and the opera *L’Heure espagnole*—both works whose melodic lines deliberately and meticulously mirror the melodic and rhythmic patterns of expressive speech. It should not, therefore, surprise us to hear a storytelling voice echoing through the melodic lines of *Ma mère l’Oye*.

‘Le jardin féérique’ offers a final example of this multilayered perspective that simultaneously portrays story, storyteller and storytelling itself. The pealing fourths, fanfare-like tonic chords and shimmering glissandi that end the work are a musical ‘happily ever after’—the castle bells ringing, trumpets blaring and fireworks bursting in celebration of a royal marriage. Yet, while chiming in fairytale celebration, the bells also suggest a gentle but inexorable return to the real world. The tolling fourths (seen in Exx. 9c and 10b) also sound as the striking of a clock (emphasised by Ravel’s stipulation of second finger for each chime)—perhaps the clock in the nursery that signals the end of storytelling and time for bed.

Ravel’s most virtuosic piano work, *Gaspard de la nuit*, and his sparsest one, *Ma mère l’Oye*, were both inspired by tales of magic and make-believe (‘black magic and white,’ wrote Marguerite Long²⁶). Moreover, in both the solo triptych and the duet suite, literary and musical narratives and structures are interwoven. In *Ma mère l’Oye*, however, the relationship between music and literature is more interactive than in *Gaspard de la nuit*. Ravel drew upon stories with a long historical and literary tradition, from a genre based, more than any other literary form, on regular patterns and clearly defined idioms. The structures of the fairytale provided Ravel with immense scope for musical representation, development and creative transformation.

²⁴ ‘He thought that he would be able to find his way easily.’ Charles Perrault, ‘Petit Poucet’; epigraph to ‘Petit Poucet’ in Ravel, *Ma mère l’Oye*.

²⁵ ‘the birds had come and eaten them all.’ Charles Perrault, ‘Petit Poucet’; epigraph to ‘Petit Poucet’.

²⁶ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Ravel*, ed. Pierre Laumonier, trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: Dent, 1973) 133.

Many of the musical techniques Ravel employed in *Ma mère l'Oye*—threefold repetitions and transformations, patterns of action and reaction, simplicity and directness of expression—can be seen and heard locking into the intrinsic demands of his literary structures.

Some of these gestures and forms match techniques that Ravel employed in other works (the concept of *dépouillement*, for example) or more archetypal musical idioms (antecedent-consequent phrase patterns): they are, in themselves, musical rather than literary techniques. While threefold phrase structures in particular are endemic to classical music (as witness, for example, the opening of Mozart's Fortieth Symphony), a crucial element here is the almost artificial emphatic formality Ravel gives to his sequences. These compositional building blocks therefore advance and enhance a narrative that is literary as well as musical. In this, they underline structural and gestural affinities between the two artforms: as we saw in 'Les entretiens,' a generic musical pattern serves to represent a common literary (fairy tale) device, as well as a specific illustrative intent.

The inflection of musical idioms to tell a literary story in *Ma mère l'Oye* (or, equally, of literary idioms to tell a musical story) springs from the same purpose as Ravel's cunning deployment of abstract musical structures (notably Classical sonata form) to contain an outpouring of dark Romanticism in *Gaspard de la nuit*. Both works adapt core compositional techniques to channel their expressive extra-musical content, and both focus musical expression directly, precisely and compellingly through a self-imposed formal framework.

Just as the episodes in a fairy tale are self-contained and colourfully contrasted, so the movements of *Ma mère l'Oye* are as independent as the stories upon which they are based. Yet their organisation and motivic connections bind the disparate movements into a cohesive whole, much as the independent episodes of the fairy tale are held within one unifying narrative. Not just fairy tales but storytelling itself plays a key role in shaping *Ma mère l'Oye*, in the subtle outlining of natural vocal inflections in 'Petit Poucet,' in the (clock) chimes of 'Le jardin féérique' and in the semi-comic Beast of 'Les entretiens'; all are perhaps depicted thus in a reflection of Ravel's own storytelling for young Mimie and Jean Godebski.

The simplicity of *Ma mère l'Oye* bewildered even Ravel's friends at first. As Louis Aubert recounted to Manuel Rosenthal:

When Ravel played *Ma mère l'Oye* [to his fellow 'Apaches'] for the first time, a heavy silence welcomed the final chord of 'Le jardin féérique'. Nobody responded. Ravel, sensing their lack of sympathy, took his manuscript and left, without receiving a single compliment or even a farewell from his friends. And Louis Aubert said, 'When we could no longer hear his footsteps on the stair, everyone lamented to each other, "We have certainly been mistaken. We thought that he would become the leader of the French school, after Debussy, but he has no substance after all."²⁷

²⁷ 'Louis Aubert m'a raconté que, quand Ravel leur a joué *Ma mère l'Oye* pour la première fois, c'est un silence pesant qui a accueilli le dernier accord du Jardin féérique. Personne ne réagit. Ravel, sentant une sorte d'hostilité, reprit son manuscrit et repartit, sans avoir reçu le moindre compliment ni même le moindre au revoir de ses amis. Et Louis Aubert racontait: 'Quand nous n'avons plus entendu ses pas dans l'escalier, tout le monde s'est lamenté: "Décidément, nous nous sommes trompés. Nous pensions qu'il allait devenir le chef de l'école française, après Debussy, eh bien, non, il n'a rien dans le ventre"'.' Marnat, *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal* 12.

Whilst the subsequent history of Ravel and *Ma mère l'Oye* has put beyond question the 'substance' of both composer and composition, the work's sparseness has continued to confound or discourage analysis: it is paradoxically one of Ravel's most performed and least written-about pieces. Beneath that façade of *dépouillement*, however, in *Ma mère l'Oye* we see Ravel pursuing compositionally virtuoso explorations of the multifaceted interactions of musical and literary form.